

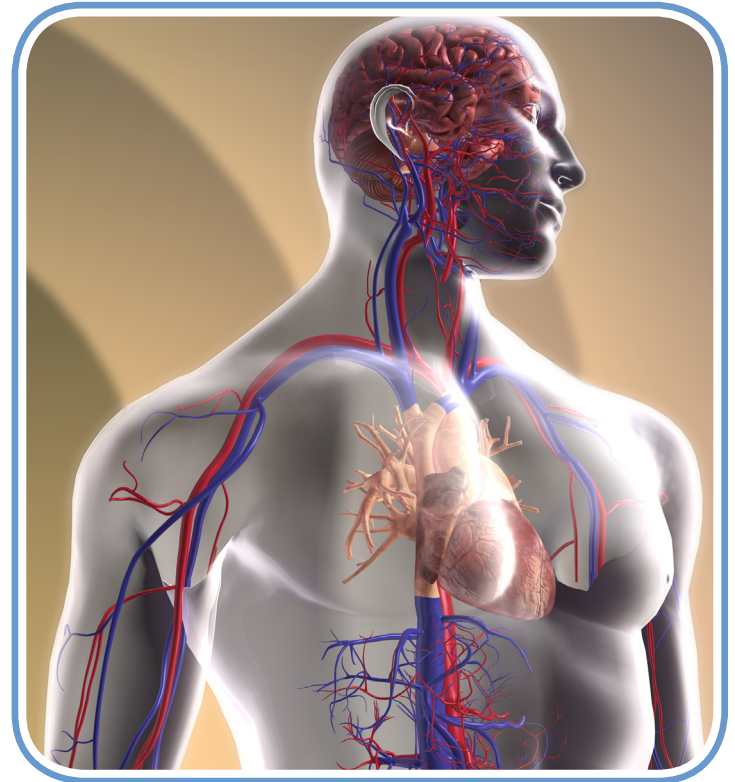
Atrial Fibrillation: Decreasing Your Risk For Stroke

What is atrial fibrillation (AF)?

- AF is an arrhythmia, a condition in which the heart beats with an irregular, or uncoordinated, rhythm
- In AF, the 2 upper chambers of the heart, the atria, beat very fast and irregularly, or “quiver”– this is called fibrillation
- When fibrillation happens, the atria do not pump effectively and blood pools within them
- This blood stasis in the atria may lead to clot formation
- Pieces of clot may break off, travel through the arteries, and lodge in the brain, causing **a stroke**

What are the warning signs of a stroke?

- If you experience any of the following symptoms, you may be having a stroke – immediately call for emergency medical help and note the time
 - Sudden numbness or weakness of the face, arm or leg, especially on one side of the body
 - Sudden confusion, trouble speaking or understanding
 - Sudden trouble seeing in one or both eyes
 - Sudden trouble walking, dizziness, loss of balance or coordination
 - Sudden, severe headache with no known cause



If I have AF, how can I reduce the risk of stroke?

- Depending on your risk for stroke, your doctor may prescribe an anticoagulant or antiplatelet agents (e.g. aspirin) to keep the blood from clotting. However, antiplatelet agents are not as effective for stroke prevention in AF patients as are anticoagulants, such as vitamin K antagonists (VKAs).
- Anticoagulants are very effective, and decrease the risk of a first stroke by over 60%
- Effective treatment of other conditions that may increase your risk for stroke, like high blood pressure, is very important
- Your doctor may also recommend lifestyle changes to decrease your risk of stroke, such as:
 - Stop smoking
 - Exercise
 - Eat healthier
 - Reduce or eliminate alcohol use

What are the most important things to remember when taking an anticoagulant to prevent a stroke in AF?

- Anticoagulants are very effective to prevent a stroke in AF because they make the blood less likely to clot
- Because they keep the blood from clotting, anticoagulants increase the risk for bleeding, including potentially serious or fatal bleeding
- Call your doctor immediately if you unexpectedly experience bleeding, bleeding that lasts a long time, or other signs and symptoms that may indicate bleeding, such as:
 - Unusual bleeding from the gums
 - Frequent nose bleeds
 - Menstrual periods that are heavier than normal
 - Bleeding that is severe or that you cannot control
 - Pink or brown urine
 - Red or black, tarry stools
 - Bruises that happen without a known cause
 - Coughing up blood, or vomiting blood or vomit that looks like “coffee grounds”
 - Headaches, or feeling dizzy or weak